DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 030 103 AL 001 903

By-Wolfram, Walter A.

Linguistic Correlates of Social Differences in the Negro Community.

Pub Date Mar 69

Note-14p.; Paper delivered at meeting of the Washington Linguistics Club, Washington, D.C., March 1969.

EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.80

Descriptors-Age Differences, Grammar, Language Research, Language Styles, *Negro Culture, *Negro Dialects, Phonology, Racial Distribution, Sex Differences, Social Class, Social Status, *Social Structure, *Sociolinguistics, *Urban Language

Identifiers-*Detroit Dialect Study, Linguistic Variables

The regularity with which much variation between forms, formerly dismissed as "free variation," can be accounted for on the basis of extra-linguistic and independent linguistic factors has made the concept of the linguistic variable an invaluable construct in the description of patterned speech variation. The linguistic variable, itself an abstraction, is realized in actual speech behavior by variants (individual items which are members of a class of variants constituting the variable). The particular value of a given linguistic variable may be viewed as the function of its correlation with extra-linguistic or independent linguistic variables. The extra-linguistic variables considered in the Detroit Dialect Study were socio-economic class, sex, age, contextual style, and racial isolation. Independent linguistic factors taken into account were linear environment and construction type. The author also summarizes in this paper several basic research questions concerning the function of the linguistic variable as a marker of social status in the black community: (1) the intersection of various social factors in accounting for patterned speech variation, (2) the extent to which social differentiation is quantitative or qualitative, (3) the relation between socially diagnostic phonological and grammatical variables, and (4) the effect of independent linguistic constraints on variability. (See related document ED 028 431.) (DO)

ED030103

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

LINGUISTIC CORRELATES OF SOCIAL DIFFERENCES IN THE NEGRO COMMUNITY

Walter A. Wolfram
Center for Applied Linguistics
Washington Linguistics Club
March 1969

AL 001 903

Within the last several years the speech patterns of lower socio-economic class Negroes have become increasingly important to a number of different disciplines, including linguistics, sociology, psychology, and education. Whereas one can certainly understand why scholars might focus on that variety of English spoken by Negroes which shows the most structural and functional contrast with standard English, it has become increasingly apparent that there is a need to study the speech of a wider representation of the black population. To understand the significance of speech as an indicator of social status in the black community it is insufficient to consider only one subset of the community. Also, in order to study the role of linguistic behavior in social mobility it is necessary to determine how different linguistic features correlate with specific social levels. Furthermore, as a practical basis for the teaching of standard English it is essential to have some understanding of what particular features characterize specific socio-economic groups and at what age levels.

As a case study of the sociolinguistic parameters of the black community, Detroit was chosen as an example of a large Northern urban area. From over 700 original interviews conducted by the Detroit Dialect Study, 60 informants were chosen to evenly represent four social classes (conventionally labeled upper-middle, lower-middle, upper-working, and lower-working class), three age levels (10-12 year old pre-adolescents, 14-17 year old teen-agers, and 30-55 year old adults), and sex differences (see Shuy, Wolfram and Riley, 1968, for a description of the field procedures).

This measurement of sociolinguistic behavior requires the formulation of a unit which can take into account continuous ordered variation within and across discrete linguistic types (e.g. within or across systematic

phoneme boundaries). The unit that permits this characterization has been termed the linguistic variable (Labov 1964: 15). The linguistic variable, itself an abstraction, is realized in actual speech behavior by variants; that is, individual items which are members of a class of variants constituting the variable. For example, we may choose to consider what we will call the theta variable in word-medial or word-final position. For this variable, generally represented orthographically as th in such words as mouth, nothing and tooth, at least four significant variants are actually realized phonetically. These include an interdental voiceless fricative θ (e.g. [nəθɪŋ]), a labio-dental voiceless fricative f (e.g. [nəfɪn]), an alveolar stop t (e.g.[nətɪŋ]), or no consonantal realization at all (e.g. [nəɪn]).

The formulation of the linguistic variable has important dividends for sociolinguistics in that it is the unit which serves as the basis for correlating linguistic with extra-linguistic or independent linguistic factors. The particular value of a given linguistic variable (x) may be viewed as a function (f) of its correlation with extra-linguistic or independent linguistic variables. For example, in the current study extra-linguistic factors such as socio-economic class, sex, age, contextual style, and racial isolation are considered; independent linguistic factors taken into account are linear environment and construction type. This may be represented as:

$$x = f(a,b,c,d,e,f.g)$$

where a = socio-economic class
b = sex
c = age
d = contextual style
e = racial isolation
f = linear environment
g = construction type

The regularity with which much variation between forms, formerly dismissed as "free variation", can be accounted for on the basis of extra-linguistic and independent linguistic factors has made the concept of the linguistic variable an invaluable construct in the description of patterned speech variation.

The study of linguistic variables rather than categorical constants adds a new dimension to the examination of speech differences, namely, the quantitative measurement of the variants of a variable. As quantitative methods are used, correlations between linguistic and social patterns emerge. The utilization of quantitative methods is, of course, somewhat of a paradox in linguistics since structural linguistics has been based on the classification of elements into discrete qualitative units, conceived as absolutely different from one another. That a qualitative model is adequate for a description of language as CODE (i.e., its cognitive function) is not disputed here; however, the functions of language when viewed as BEHAVIOR (i.e., its social function) suggest that a qualitative model is inadequate in accounting for the patterned variation between forms.

The quantitative measurement of linguistic variables necessarily involves counting variants. Although at first glance this may seem like a fairly simple procedure, hardly requiring linguistic sophistication, Labov (1968: 14) has correctly pointed out that:

> ...even the simplest type of counting raises a number of subtle and difficult problems. The final decision as to what to count is actually the final solution to the problem at hand. The decision is approached only through a long series of exploratory maneuvers.

In the first place, it is necessary to delimit the number of variants which can reliably be identified and to select relevant categories of variants for tabulation. Take, for example, the case of syllable final <u>d</u> in

in such words as good, bad, and stupid. At least six phonetically different realizations for syllable final d can be transcribed, including a voiced stop [d], a partially voiced stop [d̬] , a voiced flap [ɾ] , a glottal stop [ʔ], an unreleased stop [t̚] , and no consonantal realization at all Ø. Although six different phonetic realizations can be noted, there are only three relevant categories for tabulation: (1) a stop with partial or full voicing; (2) a voiceless glottal or unreleased alveolar stop; and (3) no consonantal realization at all.

It is also important to identify the total population of utterances in which an item may "potentially" vary (Labov 1968: 14). For example, in the consideration of copula absence for the Negro population (e.g. he nice) there are certain types of syntactic constructions (e.g. clause final, emphasis, past tense, first person singular, etc.) in which the presence of the copula is obligatory for all speakers regardless of socio-economic class; in other types of syntactic constructions, however, the copula may or may not be present. To include both types of constructions in a quantitative measurement of variation is to skew the actual figures of variation.

Further, it is necessary to identify relevant linguistic environments (phonological, grammatical, and semological) which may affect the variation of items. In identifying and classifying different types of environments affecting variation, it is also necessary to exclude environments in which distinctions between variants are neutralized for phonetic reasons. Thus, in word-final consonant clusters in such words as test, desk, and ground, it is necessary to exclude clusters which are immediately followed by a homorganic consonant (e.g. test day) from the tabulation since it is sometimes impossible to perceive whether the final consonant of the cluster is

present or absent. The importance of identifying relevant linguistic environments is no less for quantitative studies than it is for qualitative description.

With our previous discussion on the nature of the linguistic variable in mind, let us now turn to the actual variables which were delimited in our case study of Detroit. Four phonological and four grammatical variables were chosen for this study. The four phonological variables were: 1) word-final consonant + stop clusters (e.g. desk, ground, cold) whose variants are simply the presence or the absence of the final stop 2) medial and final th (e.g. tooth, with, nothing), whose variants were given earlier 3) syllable final d (e.g. shed, good, stupid) whose variants are a voiced stop, a voiceless unreleased stop or glottal, and no phonetic realization and 4) post-vocalic r (beard, fire, sister) whose variants are simply retroflection and lack of retroflection. The grammatical variables were: 1)suffixal -Z, including third person singular concord (e.g. he goes), possessive marker (John's hat, and certain plural constructions (e.g. five cents) -- the variants are simply the presence or absence of -Z , 2) multiple negation (or commonly referred to as "double negative" e.g. He didn't do nothing), whose variants are simply "realized" and "unrealized" multiple negation, 3) copula, whose variants are a full form of the copula (e.g. he is here), a contracted form (e.g. he's here), and the absence of a copula (e.g. he here), and 4) the use of "invariant be" forms where SE uses the conjugated forms of the verb (e.g. he be busy). It is certainly beyond the limitation of this paper to present a detailed analysis of each of the individual variables although this is, in fact, what was done in the actualy sociolinguistic research (see Wolfram forthcoming). What can be summarized here in this

brief account is several basic research questions concerning the function of the linguistic variable as a marker of social status in the black community: (1) the intersection of various social factors in accounting for patterned speech variation, (2) the extent to which social differentiation is quantitative or qualitative, (3) the relation between socially diagnostic (i.e. features which mark off social groups from one another) phonological and grammatical variables, and (4) the effect of independent linguistic constraints on variability. First, let us examine the intersecting social factors which correlate with speech differences. The investigation of various social parameters indicates that social status is the single most important variable correlating with linguistic differences. Of the four social classes delimited in this study, the most clear-cut linguistic boundary is found between the lower-middle and upper-working social classes and the least clear-cut difference between upper-working and lower-working classes. According to Landecker (1960: 874), it is most difficult to determine sharp social boundaries at the lower end of the social scale. We thus observe that the least clear-cut linguistic boundary parallels the least clear-cut social boundary.

Although social class is the single most important social factor correlating with speech differences, there are other social variables which intersect with class in an important way. For example, within each social class it is observed that females generally approximate the standard English norm more than males do. Hannerz (1967: 2) has observed that the Negro male departs more from the mainstream norm of middle class behavior than the female. The sex differentiation of speech behavior in this study parallels Hannerz' general observation.

Age also correlates with differences in speech behavior. Adults generally use socially stigmatized variants less than teen-agers and pre-adolescents. A comparison of the individual informants with each other indicates that there is more individual variation among middle class pre-adolescents and teen-agers than among middle class adults. Middle class adults are relatively constant in their use of standard English, whereas some pre-adolescents and teen-agers show considerable divergence from the standard English norm. On the other hand, there is more individual variation among working class adults than pre-adolescents and teen-agers. Some of these adults approximate the standard English norm more than others, whereas the working class pre-adolescents and teen-agers are relatively constant in their use of Nonstandard Negro English. A comparison of age differences in the black community with age differences in the white community suggests that age differentiation plays a more important role in the black community.

An investigation of the parameter of style shows that there is considerable variation based on the differentiation of interview and reading style, the latter style consistently showing a closer approximation of the standard English norm. This stylistic variation indicates that the informants recognize (whether consciously or unconsciously) that particular variables are markers of social status. The more stylistic variation there is, the more socially "marked" the linguistic variable. Both working class and lower-middle class informants have more stylistic variation than the upper-middle class informants.

Finally, the factor of racial isolation (as a function of peer group, educational and residential segregation patterns) is seen to be useful in comparing the speech of a number of upper-middle class informants who have

integrated or predominantly white contacts with upper-middle class informants having predominantly Negro contacts. Racial isolation is observed to have some effect on the speech of pre-adolescents and teen-agers, but there is very little effect on adults.

The second question, the extent to which social differentiation is qualitative or quantitative, reveals that differences between social groups vary slightly according to the individual variable being analyzed. However, despite the slight individual differences, we can make some general observations. For one, we observe that three of the four phonological variables investigated suggest that the differences between the four social classes of Negroes in Detroit are quantitative rather than qualitative. The one exception is the theta variable -- this variable tends to reveal the categorical absence of f among the middle class informants. But even among Detroit middle class residents (and particularly pre-adolescents and teen-agers) one will find some incidence of cluster final stop absence, post-vocalic r reduction (and this is despite the fact that the Negro community is surrounded by an r dialect area), and glottal or unreleased stop variants for syllable-final d. On the other hand, the grammatical variables most typically reveal the categorical absence of certain variants among the middle class population. If the variables chosen here are in any way typical of the actual social stratification of speech, we may conclude that phonological variables will more often reveal quantitative differences between different social classes of Negroes and grammatical variables will more often reveal qualitative differences.

A corrolary of the above observation concerning qualitative and quantitative differences between social groups is the conclusion relating to the

relative social diagnosticity of phonological variables as they compare with grammatical variables. In order to understand the relation most clearly we can suggest the use of two terms, namely what may be called "gradient" stratification and "sharp" stratification. Gradient stratification refers to a progressive increase in the frequency of occurrence of a variant between social groups without a clearly defined difference between contiguous social groups. The incidence of post-vocalic r in the black community is an example of gradient stratification. The following diagram illustrates the differences in r absence (i.e. lack of constriction) for four social classes of Negroes in Detroit, upper-middle (UMN), lower-middle (LMN), upper-working (UWN), and lower-working (LWN) class Negroes.

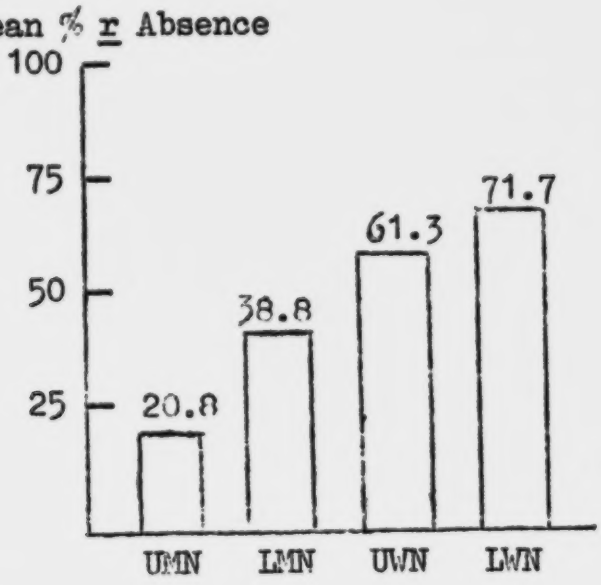

Fig. 1. Post-vocalic r Absence: An Example of "Gradient" Stratification

One observes that there is a progressive increase in the absence of post-vocalic r between the four social groups; none of the groups are discretely differentiated on the basis of r. But there are other variables which indicate a sharp demarcation between contiguous social classes (i.e. sharp stratification) such as the absence of third-person singular, present-tense-Z. Note the incidence of -Z third person singular absence in Fig. 2.

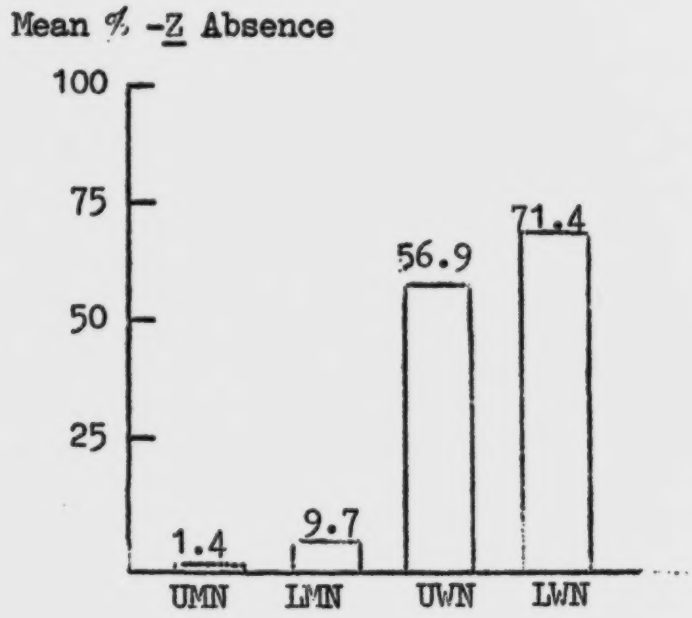

Fig. 2. Third Person Singular -Z Absence: An Example of "Sharp" Stratification

In contrast to the absence of post-vocalic r, we observe that the middle class groups are sharply differentiated from the working class groups by the incidence of -Z. Contiguous social groups (in this case, lower-middle and upper-working classes) reveal significant differences in the incidence of -Z third-person singular. In the case of the grammatical variables we often find sharp stratification. But for the phonological variables we most generally find gradient stratification. In the sense that grammatical variables more discretely divide the population than phonological variables, we may conclude that they are typically more socially diagnostic.

The fourth question, that of independent linguistic constraints on variability, is one which has received conspicuously little attention in sociolinguistic research. Whereas the last decade has witnessed an increasing awareness of systematic variation in speech as it correlates to social factors such as class, age, sex, and contextual style, the relative influence of independent linguistic constraints on variability has been overlooked.

But this research reveals that there are linguistic effects on variation which have essential implications about the relative social stigmatization of particular features. Linguistic factors such as construction type and linear environment may greatly affect the social diagnosticity of a particular feature. Take the well known case of multiple negation. The tabulations of multiple negation reveal that one type of multiple negative involving a negativized auxiliary and a negative adverb (e.g. hardly never) is observed among the middle class population while multiple negatives involving a negativized auxiliary and an indefinite pronoun or determiner (don't do nothing) are categorically absent in the speech of most middle class informants. Similarly, copula absence involving is (e.g. he nice) is confined to the working class informants, although the absence of are, particularly with gonna (e.g. They gonna) is sometimes found in the speech of both the middle class and working class.

We also see that linear environment may have an important effect on the social diagnosticity of variables. Consider the case of consonant clusters given in Fig. 3.

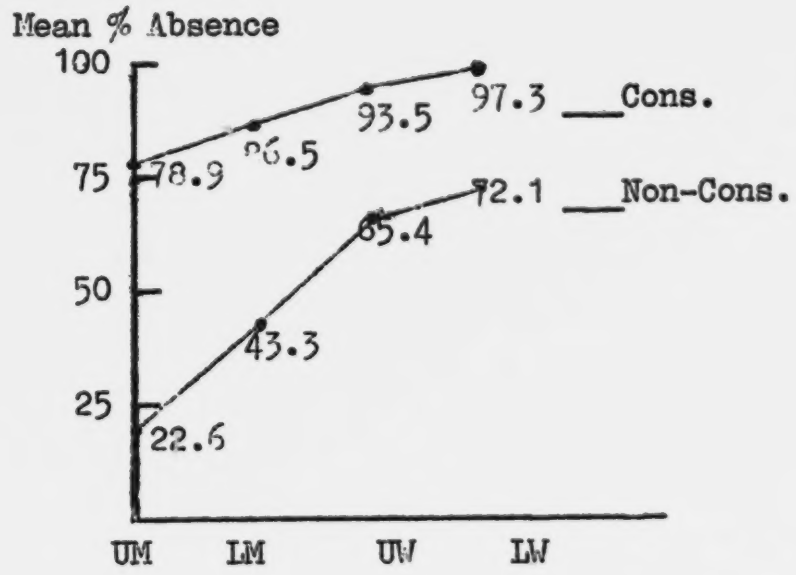

Fig. 3. Effect of Following Consonantal and Non-Consonantal Environment on Final Member of Word-Final Consonant Cluster

One will notice that the statistical discrepancy between the classes is much greater following a non-consonantal environment than following a consonantal environment. Cluster reduction is quite common for the Negro middle class population (as it is for most English speakers when a potential cluster is followed by a consonant). But when followed by a non-consonantal environment, the discrepancy between the social classes is much more apparent. We thus conclude that the absence of the final member of the cluster is considerably more stigmatized for the working class population in the non-consonantal environment. It is quite inconspicuous, and therefore less stigmatized in the consonantal environment.

In sum, we have tried to show that in order to account for systematic variation between the variants of a variable a consideration of extra-linguistic and independent linguistic constraints is imperative. Only a consideration of these two facets will reveal the fully systematic nature of variation and the various constraints on the relative social significance of certain variants.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Hannerz, UIF
1967 "Another Look at Lower-Class Sex Roles", Washington, D.C. Unpublished paper delivered at the 66th Annual Meetings of The American Anthropological Association.

Labov, William
1966 "The Linguistic Variable as a Structural Unit", Washington Linguistic Review 3: 4-22.

1968 "Contraction, Deletion and Inherent Variability of the English Copula". Unpublished paper given at Linguistic Society of American Annual meetings.

Landecker, Werner S.
1960 "Class Boundaries", American Sociological Review 25: 868-877.

Shuy, Roger W., Walter A. Wolfram and William K. Riley
1968 Field Techniques in an Urban Language Study. Washington, D.C. Center for Applied Linguistics.

Wolfram, Walter A.
forthcoming A Sociolinguistic Description of the Detroit Negro. Washington, D.C., Center for Applied Linguistics.